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Nation Building and the place of Native Americans in Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology*

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The Oxford English Dictionary defines natural history, whose popularity dramatically increased in the 17th and 18th centuries[1] as, originally, "the branch of knowledge that dealt with all natural objects, animal, vegetable, and mineral." As Pamela Regis aptly remarks, large sections of North America containing little other than those "natural objects" (Regis 6), it is hardly surprising to see that natural history thrived in the New World, as a corollary to post-"discovery" exploration and settlement. The main focus of early natural historians in the British colonies of North America was botany. In that sense, they were following in the footsteps of the first settlers, for whom recognizing edible plants, being able to grow Native crops like maize or beans, and passing on that knowledge to others had proved crucial.

Their interest, however, was of a more scientific and systematic nature, relying on methodical collection, observation and description of the natural environment. More often than not, those naturalists were commissioned by British patrons and their collections shipped to Europe.

By the end of the 18th century, as the political context in the British colonies of America changed with the access to independence of the original thirteen colonies,[2] natural history accounts became ways for the inhabitants of the new republic to define their own relationship to their environment. Defining the

1. Especially after the publication of Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* in 1735.

2. The Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 in Philadelphia.

natural identity of a milieu, especially by opposing it to the former mother country and more generally to the European continent, also meant defining its political and cultural identity.

I argue here that this is exactly what Scottish-born Alexander Wilson does in his nine-volume *American Ornithology* (published between 1808 and 1814), illustrating 268 species, including descriptions of 26 new species. He published the book in a context when the USA was trying to assert its political and military might, eventually declaring war on Britain in June 1812. Also important to my argument are Wilson's letters, some of which were published by George Ord[3] in the ninth volume of *American Ornithology*.

But if Wilson uses natural history to deliver a political message and describes his birds as a means to define a national identity and to talk about his contemporaries, one is bound to wonder what the place and status of Indians will be in that chronicle. Will they be included in the narrative, their knowledge of the American environment being an asset to be incorporated into the general picture? And if included, what will the naturalist's attitude be toward those Indigenous peoples? What status will he recognize as theirs? And what will his or his adoptive country's relationship vis-a-vis the people be? These are the questions addressed in the following essay.

An apparently utterly negative vision

The first striking element when one reads *American Ornithology* (subsequently referred to as *AO* in this essay) and tries to assess its treatment of American Indians is precisely the relative absence of the word "Indian" from the book. In the edition used for this paper, complete with Wilson's letters, the word "Indian" occurs 132 times in a total of 1234 pages. But out of those 132 occurrences, 40 designate "Indian corn". The word "Indian" as used to designate the Indigenous inhabitants of the USA is thus used only 92 times. In such a huge book, this seems to denote some sort of anecdotal presence of American-Indians. Contrary to his mentor, botanist William Bartram, who devoted part IV of his famous *Travels* to the "American Aborigines" (Bartram 386-414) and who kept commenting on the Indians he encountered, Wilson's references to Natives remain scarce and when used at all, they invariably merely illustrate some fact concerning birds. But in spite of their scarcity, these remarks permit us to make some assumptions concerning Wilson's apparent indifference to the Indians.

3. George Ord was a friend and supporter of Alexander Wilson, accompanying him on several of his journeys. After Wilson's untimely death in 1813, he finished the eighth and ninth volumes of Wilson's *American Ornithology*. He issued *A Life of Wilson* in 1828.

Even though he is aware of his being part of a natural history tradition, as he makes explicit and frequent references to his predecessors in that field,[4] Wilson's treatment of Indians is at odds with that of some earlier authors, who were trying to account for the differences between Indian nations. The aforementioned William Bartram, for example, precisely names the Creeks, the Seminoles or the Chickasaws and documents their way of life even when focusing on an altogether different topic. Wilson's approach is on the contrary globalizing. He does mention the Choctaws and Chickasaws, but as a means to define the territories inhabited by certain birds. For instance, yellow-billed cuckoos are "numerous in the Chickasaw and Choctaw nations" (*AO* vol. 1, 160) while meadow larks are

> rarely or never seen in the depth of the woods; unless where, instead of underwood, the ground is covered with rich grass, as in the Choctaw and Chickasaw countries, where I met with them in considerable numbers in the months of May and June (*AO* vol. 2, 153).

These passing remarks are interesting in so far as they show that Wilson was perfectly aware of how the different Indian nations were distributed on the national territory, as when he remarks in one of his letters: "This is the country of the Chickasaws, though erroneously laid down in some maps as that of the Cherokees" ("Life of Wilson" in *AO*, xcii). Yet, he seems to have chosen to ignore those differences, and this results in a few very general remarks, as when he mentions the Indians' fondness of summer ducks' feathers as ornaments: "Among other gaudy feathers with which the Indians ornament the calumet or pipe of peace, the skin of the head and neck of the Summer Duck is frequently seen covering the stem (*AO* vol. 3, 89, my emphasis)".[5] What could have only been a statement of fact is turned into something decidedly more judgmental and pejorative by the use of the word "gaudy," implying some sort of poor taste on the part of the global Indian population while

> (T)he long plumes of these birds (great white herons) have at various periods been in great request, on the continent of Europe, particularly in France and Italy, for the purpose of ornamenting the female head-dress. When dyed of various colors, and tastefully fashioned, they form a light and elegant duster and mosquito brush… (*AO* vol. 2, 300, my emphasis).

4. He often quotes George Edwards, Mark Catesby, Thomas Pennant or William Bartram.
5. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one can read: *a*1680 S. Butler *Genuine Remains* (1759) I. 140: "As Indians use With gawdy colour'd Plumes Their homely nether Parts 't adorn."

The mention of herons' feathers being used as ornaments by wealthy Western women or to make cleaning utensils means that in the sentence that follows, when Wilson explains that "(T)he Indians prize them for ornamenting their hair, or topknot (ibid.)," the image that is conjured up in the reader's mind is a disparaging one totally lacking in dignity. Wilson's seemingly innocent remarks on feathers used by Indians can thus be perceived as derogatory on various levels: the indiscriminate use of the word "Indian," the subsequent assumption that "Indians" in general wear headdresses and that those ornaments are garish.

Besides, Wilson tends to make frequent parallels between the birds he is studying and the Indians, animalizing the latter rather than humanizing the former. Though he himself hardly shied from shooting huge quantities of birds, he often remarks on the killing practices of Indians, which he maintains verge on savage massacres, what he calls "carnage and slaughter" (*AO* vol. 3, 62). Talking of Canada geese, he notes that one single Indian, for instance, "in a good day, will kill two hundred" (*AO* vol. 3, 62). And Wilson adds that the Indians act, in a way, as mercenaries, as they sell their killing skills to the white settlers. Mark Catesby, for example, employed one to kill an elusive yellow-breasted chat (*AO* vol. 2, 212), while

> (T)he English at Hudson's Bay, says Pennant, depend greatly on Geese, and in favorable years kill three or four thousand, and barrel them up for use. They send out their servants as well as Indians to shoot these birds on their passage (*AO* vol. 3, 62, my emphasis).

More strikingly, in various passages, Wilson insists on the physical similarities between birds and Indians. Not only do the latter mimic the song of Canada geese to perfection ("Notwithstanding every species of Goose has a different call, yet the Indians are admirable in their imitations of every one" (*AO* vol. 3, 62)), some birds sound just like Indians. Wilson indeed remarks about night herons that "On entering the swamp, in the neighborhood of one of these breeding places, the noise of the old and the young would almost induce one to suppose that two or three hundred Indians were choking or throttling each other (*AO* vol. 2, 306)". If one can understand that the sounds made by those birds are analogous to human sounds, it's harder to pinpoint what is so specific to that sound that it conjures up the image not of any humans but of "Indians […] choking or throttling each other" that is, engaged in violent and potentially lethal activities. The line between animals and humans is very thin and to present Natives fighting reinforces the impression that animality is on their side.

In addition to animalizing Indians, Wilson also refers to them to demonstrate that the hibernation of swallows is a common misconception based on

nothing tangible. The idea that barn swallows were not migratory birds but hibernated in caves or in the mud at the bottom of rivers dates as far back as the fourth century BC and Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*.[6] Wilson attempts to show how ill-founded this notion is. First, he insists that, swallows being excellent fliers, nothing hinders their migration:

> The Geese, the Ducks, the Cat-bird, and even the Wren, which creeps about our outhouses in summer like a mouse, are all acknowledged to be migratory, and to pass to southern regions at the approach of winter;—the Swallow alone, on whom Heaven has conferred superior powers of wing, must sink in torpidity at the bottom of our rivers, or doze all winter in the caverns of the earth (*AO* vol. 2, 222).

In addition to the irony Wilson uses in this passage, he goes on to say that a theory we would consider stupid for humans is similarly stupid for birds:

> I am myself something of a traveller, and foreign countries afford many novel sights: should I assert, that in some of my peregrinations I had met with a nation of Indians, all of whom, old and young, at the commencement of cold weather, descend to the bottom of their lakes and rivers, and there remain until the breaking up of frost; nay, should I affirm, that thousands of people in the neighborhood of this city, regularly undergo the same semi-annual submersion—that I myself had fished up a whole family of these from the bottom of the Schuylkill, where they had lain torpid all winter, carried them home, and brought them all comfortably to themselves again. Should I even publish this in the learned pages of the Transactions of our Philosophical Society, who would believe me? Is then the organization of a Swallow less delicate than that of a man? (*ibid.*)

Here again, it is quite surprising that Wilson should not mention humans in general but "a nation of Indians." The assumption may be that Indians are as much natural inhabitants of Pennsylvania as barn swallows are and, as such, could be objects of study as well. But again, in the reader's mind, some sort of overlap between birds and Indians takes place. If Indians potentially have the same status as the animals Wilson is studying, they have no more control over their environment than animals do, and the knowledge they have is more instinctual than intellectual and, as a result, can be easily discarded. This is precisely what Wilson does in the book.

6. "Swallows, for instance, have been often found in holes, quite denuded of their feathers, and the kite on its first emergence from torpidity has been seen to fly from out some such hiding-place." Aristotle, *History of Animals*. Book VIII, part 16, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/history_anim.8.viii.html (accessed 6th June 2017)

The overwriting of Indigenous knowledge

As a matter of fact, imperialistic political concerns provide a backbone for understanding the increased interest in and impact of natural history. As the main European powers were vying for control of the New World, gaining knowledge of the natural environment was key to controlling it. If the first explorers relied on Indigenous "expertise" and recorded the Indian names of plants and animals in their accounts, especially when their own vocabulary lacked proper terms for what they were trying to describe, they soon replaced the Indigenous names with English ones, superimposing their perception of reality. This overwriting of Indigenous secular knowledge by a modern and European approach showed that those original names had no real value and could not be used in scientific correspondence, for example. Symbolically, it can be read as an act of cultural imperialism and as ranking Indigenous traditional knowledge as inferior to European science. As Paul Lawrence Farber contends, "Native peoples might live among a profusion of birds and plants […] but from Linnaeus' perspective, the local inhabitants were lacking the most basic knowledge" (Farber 12). This loss or lack of respect for what they often called Indigenous "superstition" in their uses of plants conveyed the idea that the Natives' knowledge of, and control over, nature was only partial. As "a central measure for cultural advancement was considered to be the manner and extent in which a particular human society or nation had gained mastery over its natural surroundings" (Wolloch 45), the obvious conclusion that the Europeans drew was that these societies were not civilized and could be subdued and conquered. Natural historians, thus, became--often unwittingly--the instruments of an ideological apparatus that redefined the relationships of Europeans with the New World in terms of European supremacy.

Wilson is a perfect example of this trend toward domination, and he repeatedly disparages Native knowledge, which he deems "only fit to be forgotten" (*AO* vol. 2, 248). About the way the Indians perceive the whippoorwill, for instance, he states: "this solitary and inoffensive bird being a frequent wanderer in these hours of ghosts and hobgoblins, is considered by the Indians, as being by habit and repute little better than one of them" (*AO* vol. 2, 248). This is typical of the way Wilson builds scientific natural history knowledge, by systematically opposing his precise observations to folklore:

> The Whip-poor-will is nine inches and a half long, and nineteen inches in extent; the bill is blackish, a full quarter of an inch long, much stronger than that of the Night-hawk, and bent a little at the point, the under mandible arched a little upwards, following the curvature of the upper; the nostrils are prominent and tubular, their openings directed forward; (*AO* vol. 2, 248-249)

The Indian name of the whippoorwill itself is subject to his sarcasm and, again for the sake of "serious" science, Wilson refrains from repeating it, acting here very differently from previous naturalists who generally mentioned the Indian names of the animals or plants they encountered and often even established basic dictionaries: "I shall not, in the manner of some, attempt to amuse the reader with a repetition of the unintelligible names given to this bird by the Indians; or the superstitious notions generally entertained of it by the same people" (*AO* vol. 2, 248, my emphasis). This use of vernacular that other naturalists before him considered as proof of their first-hand knowledge of the North American environment, he dismisses as being pure, useless adornment.

In the "Sketch of the Life of Wilson", that precedes the completed version of *American Ornithology*, the same idea is developed by George Ord:

> There is a species of learning, which is greatly affected by puny minds, and for which our author entertained the most hearty (sic) contempt: this is the names by which certain nations of Indians designated natural objects. Hence we nowhere find his work disfigured by those "uncouth and unmanageable words," which some writers have recorded with a solemnity, which should seem to prove a conviction of their importance; but which, in almost every instance, are a reproach to their vanity and their ignorance. Can anything be more preposterous than for one to give a catalogue of names in a language, the grammatical construction of which has never been ascertained, and with the idiom of which one is totally unacquainted? Among literate nations it is a rule, which has received the sanction of prescription, that when one would write upon a tongue, it is indispensable that one should qualify one's self for the task, by a careful investigation of its principles. But when the language of barbarians becomes the subject of attention, the rule is reversed, and, provided a copious list of names be given, it is not required of the collector, that he should have explored the sources whence they are derived: his learning is estimated by the measure of his labor, and our applause is taxed in proportion to his verbosity ("Life of Wilson", *AO*, cxxi).

Those "uncouth and unmanageable words" are a reference to John Claudius Loudon's expression in *An Encyclopædia of Gardening*:

> Names from the Greek or Latin are exclusively admitted by modern botanists, all others being esteemed barbarous. Without this rule, we should be overwhelmed, not only with a torrent of uncouth and unmanageable words, but we should be puzzled where to fix our choice, as the same plant may have fifty different original denominations in different parts of the world, and we might happen to choose one by which it is least known (Loudon 135).

This use of Latin (or Greek) names was established by Linnaeus in the mid-18th century. By relying more particularly on Latin, a language that was

no longer specific to a nation but remained that of the scientific community, Linnaeus' work—and that of naturalists in his wake—transcended boundaries and gave a universal appeal to natural history. As Mary Louise Pratt argues, it "epitomized the continental, transnational aspirations of European science […]" (Pratt 25). What is at stake in *American Ornithology* is thus the replacing of Indigenous, non-normative, local and secular knowledge by universal normative science.

This undertaking of course reeks of political undertones. Overwriting Indigenous knowledge runs parallel to wiping out Natives and replacing them by settlers. And indeed, Wilson, writing of Lexington, Kentucky in one of his letters, rejoices that the area that used to be inhabited by savage Indians has become, in a few years, a civilized city:

> Lexington […] is an honorable monument of the enterprise, courage, and industry of its inhabitants. Within the memory of a middle aged man, who gave me the information, there were only two log huts on the spot where this city is now erected; while the surrounding country was a wilderness, rendered hideous by skulking bands of bloody and ferocious Indians ("Life of Wilson", *AO*, lxxxiv).

Not only does Wilson celebrate settlers replacing the Indians, he also denies that those original inhabitants had any legitimate right to occupy the land. In his section about the pewit flycatcher, he goes as far as accusing them of usurping land:

> For two successive years, and I believe to this day, there has been no Pewee seen about this place. This circumstance almost convinces me that birds, in many instances, return to the same spots to breed; and who knows but like the savage nations of Indians they may usurp a kind of exclusive right of tenure to particular districts where they themselves have been reared? (*AO* vol. 2, 136, my emphasis)

It is therefore clear that Wilson intersperses his description of birds with comments that take on a political meaning, the birds' actions being supposed to mirror human behaviors. Writing the Indians out of the narrative, he produces a book that is both federalist in its form and patriotic in its content.

A patriotic, Euro-centered work?

Wilson wrote to Jefferson in February 1806 that he had "the design of publishing a new ornithology of the United States of America, so deficient in the works of Catesby, Edwards and other Europeans" (Hunter 249).

The way he set out to reach his goal underlines the patriotic character of his work. Wilson's books, as described in the promotion prospectus, were to be

"the first books on the natural history of birds published in America" (Burtt & Davis 42). Contrary to the long list of previous naturalists, like John Lawson, Mark Catesby or John and William Bartram, Wilson was not sponsored by a wealthy English patron[7] and, as such, could only rely on himself to undertake his work, and promote and publish his books. This means that the knowledge and specimens he intended to gather would not be exported to Europe but would stay in their home country. The birds he killed on his expeditions were stuffed and ended up being mounted and displayed in the first American museum, founded by Charles Wilson Peale in Philadelphia, a museum which also housed, among others, the bird specimens collected by the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-1806). As for Wilson's books themselves, they were published in the United States and were meant to establish and proclaim the country's scientific and cultural independence along with its ability to produce its own cultural artifacts. The books were indeed to be printed "on the finest vellum paper; printed in a typescript specially designed for this work;" (Burtt & Davis 42). In the Preface to volume 5, Wilson further underlines that his books bore testimony to the new productive capacity of the country:

> […] its engravings are a monument to the merits of Messr' Lawson, Murray and Warnicke, the elegance of the letter press a high honor to the taste of the Founders Binney and Ronaldson... while the paper from the manufactory of Mr. Ames, proves what American ingenuity is capable of producing when properly encouraged (*AO*, vol. 5, 1812, x).

The brochure Wilson carried with him while crisscrossing the United States in search of birds and subscriptions for the first volume of his book provides further insight into his view of American nature as a common heritage, something that could unite American citizens in their relationship to the land and distract them from the "noisy discord of politics…" (Burtt & Davis 43). By insisting on the merits and beauty of contemplating nature, Wilson is here figuratively nation building—not building towns and making money of course, but building through words and visual representation an environment that is the United States. In that regard, his approach is very similar to the Hudson River School painters who, just a few years later, were to celebrate the uniqueness of America by juxtaposing untamed wilderness, pastoral scenes, and the encroachment of industrial activity on pristine nature.

Wilson's canvassing the country from Maine to Florida and down the Ohio River to Louisiana in search of subscribers gives us a snapshot of what the

7. John Lawson (1674-1711) was sponsored by James Petiver, Mark Catesby (1683-1749) by Sir Hans Sloane (among others), John Bartram (1699-1777) by Peter Collinson and his son William Bartram (1739-1823) by John Fothergill.

readership was like in the young United States. By appealing to a geographically extensive readership, Wilson's book gives shape to a nation that was still virtual while his letters or anecdotes vividly portray the country's inhabitants. His travels and letters were thus in a way a means of bringing together a rapidly expanding country by depicting it and its natural resources. In this depiction, there was hardly any place for American-Indians. The narrative Wilson unfolds in his book is that of a young and independent nation, just free from British hegemony, and in which European-Americans play the leading part.

Wilson indeed uses birds' characteristics to show that they and, as a consequence, the country they inhabit, should be admired and respected. His description of the tyrant flycatcher, also called kingbird, is in this respect particularly revealing. Wilson describes the bird as being particularly aggressive during the mating and breeding season: "At that season his extreme affection for his mate, and for his nest and young, makes him suspicious of every bird that happens to pass near his residence, so that he attacks without discrimination, every intruder" (*AO* vol. 2, 128). Wilson insists that in spite of its small size, the tyrant flycatcher scares away bigger, more powerful birds, making it a perfect image of the fighting spirit of revolutionary America.

But Wilson essentially writes Indians out of any cultural context given how he imposes nationalistic characteristics that are relevant only within the framework of British and Patriot politics. His presentation of the tyrant flycatcher is thus applicable only in the context of the young United States' needing to defend itself against tyrannical Britain. It seems to lose all relevance in the context of a tyrannical U.S. in relation to the Native Americans, except if one argues that Wilson suggests that like the British across the Atlantic, the Native Americans too pose threats and need the patriot, the American flycatcher to attack without discrimination. This reversal resonates: in this reading the Indigenous people become the intruders and must be driven from the European Americans' residences.

One of the birds the small tyrant flycatcher chases is the bald eagle, the bird the Continental Congress chose as the emblem of the young republic in June1782 (Lawrence 63) and a bird which was also of sacred importance to the American-Indians: "For many American Indians, no being is more sacred than the eagle. [...] It possesses courage, swiftness and strength, qualities to be emulated. The feathers of this solar bird are regarded as rays of sun" (Lawrence 65). Wilson, though, never acknowledges being aware of these beliefs.

However, Wilson not only uses his birds to laud the new republic, but also to condemn the country's potential flaws. An example of this can be seen in his treatment of the blue jay. After making it clear that this bird is typically

American ("This elegant bird is… peculiar to North America", *AO* vol. 1, 134), he explains that it is the owl's bitterest enemy, as he notes:

> No sooner has [the jay] discovered the retreat of one of these, than he summons the whole feathered fraternity to his assistance, who surround the glimmering solitaire, and attack him from all sides, raising such a shout, as may be heard, in a still day, more than half a mile off. The war becomes louder and louder, and the Owl, at length forced to betake himself to flight, is followed by the whole train of his persecutors, until driven beyond the boundaries of their jurisdiction (*AO*, vol. 1, 135).

While the description is literally what happens when a blue jay discovers an owl, Wilson's use of words like "war", "persecutors" and the very notions of "boundaries" and "jurisdiction" may evoke, again, the united colonies kicking imperialistic Britain out.

A few lines later, however, he criticizes the blue jay for becoming "in his turn, the very tyrant he detested […] plundering every nest he can find of its eggs, tearing up the callow young by piecemeal, and spreading alarm and sorrow around him" (*AO* vol. 1, 135-13, my emphasis). Wilson's blue jay may well here stand for the United States' early imperialistic tendencies. Wilson seems to condone settlement and westward expansion and, as a result, to ignore the colonists' attacks on the Native Americans and tyrannical treatment of them, including claiming their land, establishing reservations and denying them citizenship. But his position as it appears from his bird narratives may be more subtle than it at first seems, providing him with an oblique and subtle tool for criticism.

The birds are indeed his objects of study and the reason for his travels, but they also give him a means of interacting with the Natives on a different basis. Having captured a Carolina Parrot, he crosses the wilderness between Nashville and Natchez, which he describes as a hellish place with "dangerous creeks to swim, miles of morass to struggle through, rendered almost as gloomy as night by a prodigious growth of timber, and an underwood of canes and other evergreens" (*AO* vol. 1, 113). His avian prisoner serves as a sort of interface with the local tribes: "In passing through the Chickasaw and Choctaw nations, the Indians, wherever I stopped to feed, collected around me, men, women and children, laughing and seeming wonderfully amused with the novelty of my companion" (ibid). In that inhospitable environment, the bird acts as a sort of talisman and even allows linguistic exchanges to happen: "The Chickasaws called it in their language 'Kelinky'; but when they heard me call it Poll, they soon repeated the name; and wherever I chanced to stop among these people, we soon became familiar with each other through the medium of Poll" (ibid).

Descriptions of such moments of familiarity between Wilson and the Indians are obviously rare in *American Ornithology*, but they do show that American nature could be a common ground on which to build a more positive relationship between European-Americans and Native Americans. Or rather could have been. Indeed, the death of Wilson's bird, Poll, puts an end to such interactions:

> I took her with me to sea, determined to persevere in her education; but, destined to another fate, poor Poll, having one morning about daybreak wrought her way through the cage, while I was asleep, instantly flew overboard, and perished in the Gulf of Mexico (*AO* vol. 1, 114).

Poll's death also prefigures the extinction of the Carolina parrot, the only parrot endemic to the United States. Hunted for food, feathers, "sport" and to protect crops, the bird was driven to extinction. The loss of habitat of these birds, which, according to Wilson, liked "low, rich, alluvial bottoms, along the borders of creeks, covered with a gigantic growth of sycamore trees or button-wood—deep and almost impenetrable swamps, where the vast and towering cypress lift their still more majestic heads" (*AO* vol. 1, 109) also contributed to their extinction, which was complete by the early 20th century (Saikku 6).[8] The dividing line, or fracture, between European-Americans and Native-Americans seems to have been made worse precisely by those changes in the environment.

We can see in Wilson's *American Ornithology* that the European-centric worldview is reflected throughout and that this worldview tends to minimize any Native presence. From scant references to Indians, to the refusal to use or even mention Indigenous terms for the flora and fauna, to the dehumanizing of the Native people by pejorative analogies with non-human animals, Wilson participates in the erasure of Indians from the early American map. And finally, he describes the loss of one legitimate means of interaction or of a common ground between European- and Native-Americans, that of the Carolina parrot. The parrot's death and the species extinction can stand metonymically for a lost chance for equitable relationships between Indians and colonists.

8. "During the 19th century the range of the Carolina Parakeet gradually diminished from east to west toward the Mississippi river. Dates of the extirpation coincide well with the growth of human populations, increase of farming area and destruction of forests in those regions" (Saikku 5).

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Résumé : Dans son ouvrage *American Ornithology* (1808-1814), Alexander Wilson ne se contente pas de proposer un inventaire aussi précis que possible de la faune aviaire américaine. Il utilise également les oiseaux comme vecteurs d'un message politique lui permettant de définir une identité politique pour la jeune république américaine. Mais si les oiseaux de Wilson lui servent, entre autres, à délivrer un message fédérateur, on peut se demander ce qu'il en est de la place des Indiens dans son ouvrage. Les inclut-il, à la faveur de leur connaissance de l'environnement, ou bien sont-ils sciemment laissés en marge ?

Mots-clés : ornithologie, identité nationale, amérindiens, début du 19e siècle

Abstract : In this paper I argue that in his literary travel narrative, *American Ornithology* (1808-1814), Alexander Wilson politicizes his ornithological interpretations to promote his adopted country, relying on the tradition of natural history accounts but giving the genre a very original and political twist both in method and contents. But if Wilson uses natural history to deliver a political message and his birds to define a national identity and to talk about his contemporaries, one is bound to wonder what the place and status of Indians will be in that chronicle.

Keywords : ornithology, national identity, Native Americans, early 19th century.

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